

Character areas

An important step in the creation of a community vision is providing a verbal and graphical description of what exists in the community and provide some thoughts on how they will develop in the future. This is accomplished through the use of a character area map. The character areas are unique areas of the county that contain characteristics that separate them from the surrounding areas. They exhibit development patterns, urban design, special architectural elements, history, stability, blight, or some other factor that will assist others in understanding more about the area. The final product of this Community Assessment segment is a graphical representation of the community with accompanying classification descriptions. It is important to note that Cobb County does not intend to use the Character Areas as a policy document. The Future Land Use Map, which is included later in this document, is the official land use document of the Comprehensive Plan with respect to growth policy. The Character Areas are meant as a tool to help create a vision for the future of the county and will be used to develop the goals and policies that are included later in this document.

The process for developing the Character Area map was a public process. Staff started the process of recommending character areas as part of the Community Assessment. The Steering Committee then revised the Character Area designations prior to the public meeting. Finally, on May 22nd, 2006, the Planning Division performed a design charette with the community as a way to involve them in the visioning process. The comments from the public were taken back to the Steering Committee and additional revisions were made to the map in order to create a complete community vision that was based upon the needs and desires as expressed by the participating public. Overall, the public was positive about the development of the Character Areas and it assisted staff and the community with generating a vision for the community. Please refer to the Character Areas map to obtain a visual layout of the categories as defined below.

Rural

Rural (R) categories are typified by areas with agricultural production, horse farms or other types of non commercial animal activities, open space, pasture lands, and large lot residential uses. The intent of this district is to encourage the preservation of a more pastoral lifestyle and provide an area that harmonizes with the surrounding natural environment. These areas contain a high degree of open space and a large separation between buildings. Developments in these areas should respect the surrounding natural environment by protecting ponds, streams, wetlands, and areas containing steep slopes. In addition, developments in the area should try to preserve tree cover in the area, ensure the health of specimen trees, and preserve important stands of trees with the intention of creating greenways throughout this section of the county. The R areas tend to have few existing pedestrian facilities and little to no transit opportunities. Future developments in these areas should respect the bucolic nature of the surrounding community and be created in harmony with the natural environment by encouraging large lot residential communities or communities that preserve quality open space. This would not result in traditional suburban subdivisions with masonry walls, wrought iron gates and other feature, but rather houses and roadways that respect the contours of the land and include rolled curbs, winding sidewalks, and walking trails. Finally, this category includes standard rural areas and rural residential areas. The rural areas will contain multi-acre lots and contain the majority of the agricultural and husbandry activities, while the rural residential areas have subdivisions that are complimentary to the existing natural environment.

Suburban Residential

Suburban Residential (SR) areas are composed almost exclusively of residential uses. Many of these areas also contain civic buildings that assist in education, service provision, or act as a place of assembly. Some of the areas termed Suburban Residential are built out areas while others are considered developing. The two types of Suburban Residential areas are similar in their primary make-up and development pattern with features that include cul-de-sac street designs, low density developments, minimal pedestrian facilities, a varying degree of open space, and a high to moderate degree of

building separation. Generally, these areas contain poor connectivity due to lack of street/sidewalk connections between adjoining developments.

The suburban residential environment within Cobb County provides residents with a living environment that is comfortable and inviting. It also offers a sense of security, safety, and consistency that is desired by many individuals in metro Atlanta. The dedicated open space areas in suburban areas tend to be privately owned either collectively or individually. The collective ownership of open space is generally under the purview of homeowner's associations. These open space areas are provided by covenants and are maintained by the residents of the subdivision. It would be a benefit to the community to have these areas permanently protected through either a conservation easement or deed restrictions. The individual ownership of open space is provided in existing lots of varying size. Since they are privately owned pieces of property, there are no guarantees that these areas of open space will exist in the future, because development may occur that will alter the tree cover and topography of the land.

Suburban residential areas are characterized by street layouts containing a cul-de-sac network flowing into a collector and arterial street system which contributes to severe traffic congestion at peak travel times. This is compounded every time an additional subdivision is added onto an existing roadway. There is no simple solution to this dilemma because the County cannot take away people's right to develop their property under the current policy and legal framework. This places the County in a reactive position when planning future transportation investments due to a lack of predictability concerning the timing of residential development.

The Suburban Residential areas can be improved by retrofitting neighborhoods through the addition of community focal points (schools, community centers, parks, and well-designed small neighborhood oriented commercial uses), sidewalks, street interconnections, and appropriate traffic calming technologies. These focal points can be a benefit to the community as long as they are planned so that they will not negatively

impact the viability and desirability of adjacent neighborhoods and to be developed in a way that are compatible with the neighborhood.

Residential Revitalization

The Residential Revitalization (RR) areas are older traditional or suburban neighborhood developments. These areas contain some of the older housing units in the county or contain some of the early suburban style housing in the county. Generally these areas contain a high level of pedestrian orientation, sidewalks, street trees, small regular lots, limited open space, and a low degree of building separation, with a few exceptions. The RR areas have a mixed homeownership rate and some of the housing stock in the area is declining due to a lack of investment by the property owners. The areas need to have strategic investment into the community in a way that will stabilize the neighborhoods and preserve the integrity of the existing neighborhood. This can be accomplished by creating additional home owners in the area and by providing financial assistance to low income homeowners for upgrading their housing units through additional maintenance and upkeep. Revitalization in the area should be done by keeping the general layout of the neighborhood intact, maintaining the basic street system and sustain basic architectural elements with existing structures in the area. New housing units created through infill activity should be similar in nature to the existing housing stock so they fit into the community while also meeting current market demands. As the residential housing stock in these areas improves, there will be a corresponding elevation in the quality of neighborhood serving commercial space in the nearby commercial corridors/nodes.

Redevelopment, Residential

Redevelopment-Residential (RdR) areas are older neighborhoods, usually developed before or just after World War II are experiencing major decline in the housing stock due to the lack of investment and upkeep of properties. Many RdR areas contain large spaces of vacant land, deteriorating structures, and unoccupied units. These areas tend to have low home ownership rates. There may also be instances of commercial intrusion into the residential areas in an attempt to “jump start” development in these areas. New

developments may need to demolish many of the existing structures, if they are not salvageable. Due to the extent of the deterioration in these neighborhoods, the complete re-imagination of the neighborhoods, or portions thereof, may be necessary to start creating stability. If the area was originally developed as a traditional neighborhood development, the public space, streets roads, parks, and other common areas should be maintained. If the areas were suburban style cul-de-sac subdivision, additional street connections may be necessary to increase accessibility, disperse traffic, and shorten walk and bike trips. The goal in these large scale redevelopment projects is to create a village or hamlet concept that have a central community gathering place, multiple residential styles to accommodate diverse populations, and easy access to neighborhood retail needs. This will help to generate a sense-of-community in these areas and start to rebuild the social psyche for the community.

Village

The Village (V) areas are older more traditional neighborhoods many of which were developed prior to World War II. These areas are predominantly residential, but also have small neighborhood-scale businesses located at the focal point of the neighborhood. The business districts in these areas help to form a traditional neighborhood development that has distinct design characteristics appropriate in its original developmental time frame. These areas have a high level of pedestrian orientation, sidewalks, street trees, limited open space, and a variety of housing types and units. The surrounding residential area contains stable areas with well maintained structures and lots witnessing a high rate of homeownership. These areas should focus on preserving and maintaining the original character of these neighborhoods. Infill development should be done in a manner that does not significantly detract from the existing neighborhood, but also meet the market demands of today's home buyer. The grid street network should be maintained and where appropriate, additional pedestrian and bicycle facilities should be incorporated.

Activity Center

The Activity Center (AC) areas are a neighborhood or community focal point with a concentration of commercial/retail activities and may have a higher residential density

compared to what exists in the surrounding community. These areas also tend to have open space or other areas to promote public gathering and social interaction. Smaller activity centers serve one neighborhood, while larger activity centers may draw from numerous neighborhoods. The larger the activity center, the more appropriate it is to have a residential component mixed with the commercial/retail component. Residential areas in the larger AC should be either mixed-use buildings or areas used as a buffer that creates separation between non-residential components and existing residential neighborhoods. The stabilization and protection of the existing residential communities surrounding the activity centers is important to the future development of these areas. Pedestrian activity is another important factor in the viability of activity centers because it allows people that live in the aforementioned residential areas the ability to accomplish daily trips without using the automobile. This will require a comprehensive strategy that ensures pedestrian facilities throughout the activity center and also requires connections with existing established neighborhoods. Pedestrian facilities in these areas should be developed in a manner that provides a level of safety in its interaction with the vehicular traffic, and is well connected in order to facilitate movement between buildings. These should be done with bringing attention to detail to the facilities in order to promote aesthetically pleasing public investments.

Another method to differentiate types of activity centers is to divide them into neighborhood and community activity centers. The Future Land Use map categories, described later in this document, provide thorough definitions and policies detailing the differences between these two land use types and their impact on the surrounding community.

Redevelopment, Commercial

Commercial Redevelopment (RdC) areas are declining, vacant, or under-utilized strip shopping centers. They are generally areas containing a high degree of access to vehicular traffic. Some of the characteristics of the existing developments include a high quantity of on-site parking, a low degree of open space, moderate floor area ratio. It is important to retrofit these older commercial centers into a more aesthetically pleasing and

marketable product for future tenants. These aesthetic improvements can occur in a multitude of ways including façade improvements with new architectural elements, reconfiguration of the parking lot and circulation routes, providing pedestrian amenities such as covered walkways, benches, ornamental lighting, and bicycle racks, adding landscaping and street trees, and the establishment of new commercial structures at the street frontage in areas that was previously used for overflow parking thus creating a more centralized shopping area with internal parking.

Civic

Civic (Cv) areas are congregations of uses that are appropriate for government, cultural activities, and other areas that congregate people to a particular location for community-based reasons. This is an area appropriate for schools, county government buildings, post offices, museums, and churches. Public art should be encouraged throughout these areas as a means of celebrating the history and culture of the area. Pedestrian systems should be enhanced to provide for greater accessibility and enhance the public's enjoyment of these areas.

Corridors

The Corridors (Cor) are areas that exist along major arterials roads and highways. Currently, the areas are primarily commercial in nature with the majority of the uses being strip commercial centers and served almost exclusively by the automobile. There is a diversity of quality with corridor areas because some are economically viable while others are underutilized or contain marginal uses. These areas require a new vision that will help bring a more pleasing and inviting built environment. This can be accomplished by adding urban design treatments such as transitioning these roadways to boulevards, adding decorative streetlights, street trees, landscaped areas, requiring power lines to be placed underground, and creating multi-modal facilities to encourage pedestrian, bicycle, and transit usage. These improvements will result in a more aesthetic environment, will result in a safer environment for pedestrians, and will help to revitalize some of the underperforming centers. Another facility that will improve pedestrian safety is pedestrian refuge islands. This will assist in creating safe areas to ease crossings at major

intersections. Inter-parcel access should also be encouraged between properties to assist with traffic management issues. It is also appropriate to add some residential uses into the corridor areas.

The future development of corridors can be separated into urban corridors and suburban corridors. Both require some residential development or mixed-use development to diversify the land uses in the area. The main difference between the two is the scale of the developments that is created.

The urban corridors areas should be located along main thoroughfares that connect the urban centers or are within close proximity to the interstate highway system. The urban corridors should sustain higher density residential uses and more intense commercial/office uses. Many of these developments should be in a mixed-use format that will allow for alternatives to the current perpetuation of sprawl. It is integral that existing stable neighborhoods in the vicinity of these urban corridors have adequate transition and buffering from the higher intensity uses to protect these neighborhoods from negative externalities relating to new development.

The suburban corridors areas should be located along arterial streets that provide general connectivity for other areas of the county. The development on the suburban corridors should be much less intense when compared with the urban corridors. The existing infrastructure and existing surrounding land-uses require a less intense residential and commercial/office use. Generating a mixture of uses along these corridors is also important to assist in providing additional housing opportunities without destroying additional open space or destroying the fabric of existing stable residential communities. Adequate buffers and transitions should be instituted to protect existing stable neighborhoods from the new developments that will be generated on these corridors.

Urban Center

Urban Center (UC) areas contain a concentration of high intensity commercial and office uses. These areas tend to have a high degree of access by vehicular traffic and transit.

Urban centers evolve in areas that have quality access for the metropolitan region such as at intersections of major Interstate systems. It is common in the UC to have a low degree of internal open space, a high floor area ratio, and development occurring on large tracts of land as a campus or unified development. The concentration of uses in these areas, as mentioned above, should contain high-density retail, office, and services to act as an employment center that draws people from throughout the metropolitan area. It is important to start expanding the diversity of uses within the urban areas by incorporating some housing opportunities. The housing should be of higher-density and include a diversity of housing types and price ranges. Design of all new construction in an urban center should be pedestrian-oriented that would include safe and aesthetically pleasing connections between different uses, greenspace, and multi-use facilities. New transit and vehicular transportation facilities should be designed and implemented in ways to make the areas more pedestrian friendly by incorporating sidewalk, pedestrian amenities, pedestrian islands, and other facilities to ease pedestrian mobility while also maintaining adequate vehicular service.

Office Warehouse

Office Warehouse (OW) areas contain uses that have wholesale trade, distribution activities, and office parks. These are areas with campus-style office, service, and manufacturing uses that are characterized by a high degree of vehicular access. The developments tend to have plenty of on-site parking, a low percentage of open space, and a moderate floor area ratio. Uses in these areas do not generate excessive noise, particulate matter, vibration, smoke, dust, gas, fumes, odor, radiation, or other nuisance characteristics. New developments in Office Warehouse areas should incorporate landscaping and site design solutions to soften or shield views of buildings, parking lots, loading decks, etc. Some lands in the OW district are zoned as Light Industrial or Heavy Industrial should be protected from residential and retail incursion. It is vital to the future growth of the county that industrial lands be preserved for future economic expansion.

Industrial Manufacturing

Industrial Manufacturing (IM) areas contain uses that have manufacturing, assembly, processing activities, and other types of standard manufacturing processes. These are industrial land uses where noise, particulate matter, vibration, smoke, dust, gas, fumes, odors, radiation, or other nuisance characteristics are not contained on the site. New developments in Industrial Manufacturing areas should incorporate landscaping and site design solutions to soften or shield views of buildings, parking lots, loading decks, etc. In addition, users in these areas should incorporate measures to mitigate impacts to adjacent developments and the natural environment. Lands listed as industrial manufacturing that are zoned as Light Industrial or Heavy Industrial should be protected from residential and retail incursion. It is vital to the future growth of the county that industrial lands be preserved for future economic expansion.

Park, Recreation, Conservation, and Historic

Park, Recreation, Conservation (PRCH) areas are a mixture of land uses that include undeveloped, natural, environmentally sensitive, recreational uses, significant landmarks, and areas with significant historical interest. These include areas with floodplain, wetlands, steep slopes, wildlife management areas, protected open space, pocket parks, linear greenspace linkages, multi-use trails, historic properties, and historic districts. The PRC areas should maintain their current character by not allowing substantial developments that will result in major land disturbance activity. This will help preserve the character of these areas and ensure greenspace/natural lands for future generations. Historic properties in designated areas should be protected from demolition and encouraged for rehabilitation. New developments in specified historic districts should be of scale and architectural design to fit well into the historic fabric of the area.

Johnston's River Line

The Johnson's River Line is an area with a large quantity of significant archeological resources that include a long line of trenches and other earthen defenses. General Joseph Johnston constructed the earthworks to repel the Union forces as they marched towards Atlanta in 1864. The River Line is particularly significant due to the presence of very

unique fortifications called *shoupades*. These Civil War fortifications were constructed solely along the River Line and do not exist in any other place in the country. Thirty-six were originally engineered, and only 9 remain.